DANCE AND MUSIC

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THE Dance is a unique Art which has always had a high place in the history of almost every country. Many questions arise in one's mind when one thinks of the Dance. Is it an art meant to give joy to the onlookers? Is it a hobby? Is it a study and an aspect of learning? Or, is it meant only as an outlet for the dancer's desire for rhythmic expression?

In every nation these questions are answered differently. One has, however, to realise that the very rhythm and grace of bodily movements which so subtly co-ordinate with music are a natural expression for all humanity. There are many who can enjoy witnessing such expressions of rhythm and joy; but I think most would say that, granted the necessary natural gifts, it would be far preferable to be a creative artist oneself. The desire to express the rhythmic sense

that humanity possesses takes the form of the dance, which is divinity trying to find release even through the coarsest matter, the physical body. This divine life changes its purpose and its expression according to the development of the individual and the nation. But in India still, the marks of the ancient spirit persist, and there is a vast majority who cannot respond to such exploitations of the physical as the West can. Except among the purest classical dancers, the body is the chief instrument of ugliness masquerading as beauty. In the music halls, night clubs and a number of other entertainments, not only is the dance degraded but Womanhood as well. Where this happens, there is bound to be a general decay of civilization. Hence war.

In ancient India, as can be seen through a study of the classic books, the dance had the highest conception of beauty. It had its place in every happy occasion of life. It is the greatest and most beautiful gift through which the message of the highest spiritual life is expressed. The great deific being, Nataraja, is himself a dancer; and so is his consort Parvati, also Sri Krishna who danced in Brindaban. Nowhere

except in India is there so perfect a system of dancing, and it is marvellous to see how no detail of expression was left out. In fact it will take many years of research and work before we can attain even a small portion of the achievements laid down in the Bharata Natya shastra for a full study of the dance. The more one studies, the more one realises what an ocean of learning it is. The dance gestures or abhinaya (expression) with the hastas, or language of the hands, dancing to songs, and the meaning of the words contained therein, are yet undiscovered elsewhere, while in India it is already some thousands of years old. One also sees how in olden days the accomplishment of the average family was of a very high order. In Java, the dance is not merely an expression of the cultural background of the nation, but a great accomplishment and an ornanment to individuals as well. In Western countries, the classical dance, such as the ballet, was, and is still, among the best people, not only an accomplishment, not merely a national achievement, but a mission. The entire lives of dancers of the ballet revolve round the perfecting of themselves not only in technique, which is most difficult, but in improving

their art and its message day by day. Great dancers like Anna Pavlova were obviously messengers of beauty. The rigorous work, the complete subjugation of all other personal desires and pleasures, the abandonment of one's being to the Cause, are very similar to what we find in the great learned artists, musicians and pandits of India. They lived only for their Art ; everything else took second place. In all countries this attitude belongs to the few ; and to the majority it is either a matter of great learning and study or an expression of their simple joys of life through folk-dancing as one finds particularly amongst the peasant people both in the West and in India. This can also be a great contribution to the Nation ; for, though the dancers may not be individually great, the collective atmosphere created adds to the grace of a country and the helping of individuals to express the hidden God. Not everyone is blessed by the Gods in having all the gifts that a dancer must possess ; and therefore, collective dancing, which can be simple, beautiful, classical and inspiring, is bound to bring new life and an expression of joy particularly in these days of gloom. A human being is

composed of the body, the emotions, the intellect and the cosmic self. The dance can contribute both to the positive and to the negative, to the beautiful and the ugly side of human beings.

As I have already said, the dance is an expression by the physical body. Because it is a physical expression it is both a dangerous and a magnificent instrument. The weakness of the physical body is its coarseness and vulgarity. For those who in their minds and emotions are unable to transcend the physical, the dance can become an instrument of sensuality and coarseness. But, on the other hand, for those who have a higher knowledge, the body can fulfil its highest Dharma not only by giving to the world an expression of physical grace and beauty, but by giving through the very physical being itself an embodiment, an expression, of the Cosmic Being. Therefore is it that emotion has a very high place in the dance, for emotion directs the message of grace and rhythm. In Bharata Natya, bhava is considered the heart of the Art. Many consider Bhava to be the ability to portray emotions. This is true, but Bhava is more. It is the essence of intellect as well, and there is Bhava as much in Nritta (pure rhythm) as in

Abhinaya (expression). People often think that the Tillana, or Thirmanams with adavus and intricate foot work, are an aspect of laya or rhythm, and therefore bear no relation to Bhava. In reality there is the Bhava of the body as much as of the face, the expression of music as well as of the emotion. In order to accomplish this perfect blending of the body, the emotions and the intellect there yet is needed knowledge —a knowledge not only of the books which in India are unique, but also a knowledge of the great philosophies, literature, poetry, music and religion, a knowledge by which the mind transcends itself in the world of wisdom. When this is achieved, Bharata Natya is justified by the dancer, and it becomes a perfect expression of the will of the Divine ; the dance becomes a Veda and the dancer a Yogi.

Of course, the essential element of the Dance is joy, the inner bliss which is a deep experience, not an outer happiness. This is where the conception of the Dance differs in the West. Great ballet dancers have one-pointed devotion to the Art, good taste, imagination, perfect technique and a sense of subtle and pure beauty ; but their idea of Bhava is developed only to the

extent of the Bhava of the body. The higher emotion and intellect are not known. In every plane of consciousness the Dance can bring joy, but from the Indian point of view it involves the complete control of the mind, the emotions and the body : each fulfilling its Dharma of serenity, joy and grace, which can transcend its lower counterparts.

The Dance is also an art which, like the Drama, can be a centre and unifier of all arts ; for learning, sense of colour, line, music with its subdivisions of Bhava, Raga and Tala, the art of the stage, make-up etc., are all necessary to the dancer. When one enters into the true world of the dance, one comes to realise that there is no place in it for vulgarity or cruelty, which unfortunately find their place in the world of art everywhere. There is a misconception on the part of some who are notable exponents of the Dance that it is necessary to force their knowledge on others, particularly children who are cruelly treated for the sake of learning something which has not become an experience to them. This vice is bound to cause the death of the art, as it has done in all civilizations. The sensual and vulgar expressions introduced into life are

always signs of the deterioration of civilization. The Dance, being an expression of the body, has been particularly exploited. It is unfortunate that it should have descended in India to the lowest level, when India is the very home of the great and the spiritual. Unfortunately, except for what one hears and reads in the many books, Dance is an art which cannot leave living memorials like other more permanent expressions of art such as painting, sculpture, architecture. etc. But through the figures in Temples one can get a glimpse of the spirit of the Dance as it was in India, though the savagery of war destroyed many of those magnificient monuments of ancient culture.

The dance, as I have tried to point out, may be an accomplishment, a hobby or an entertainment ; but whatever it is, it had its high purpose wonderfully understood by the great Rishis of India ; and I hold that India can teach to the world that the true Dance is an art which, like the white light of the Sun, draws into itself the rainbow of other arts, and which as an art can be one of the greatest achievements of humanity. The dance transcends the physical with the body as a vehicle, and lifts humanity into a world of the

higher emotion of joy and the pure intellect or wisdom. It is an art for the musician, the poet and the philosopher alike ; and for those who understand this, it becomes a great inspiration which will lift humanity to wondrous heights.

MUSIC

To describe the indescribable is to describe music. Music being a language in itself, it needs no other language to describe it. All over the world no influence has been greater than the influence of music ; and India has been the source of inspiration to all teachers and philosophers. No country in the world is more music-loving than India, and we can trace the origin of epics and poems to the inspiration of music. In the earliest and greatest epic of India, which is also the earliest epic of the world, the Ramayana, the great sage Valmiki describes the story of Sri Ramachandra in metric and rhythmical beauty, expressive of all the deepest human emotions and also bringing into it the essence of the Vedas. The sons of Sri Rama, who were brought up in a hermitage in the forest, learnt to sing the entire Ramayana,

and with the magnificent beauty of their voices, which brought the sense of holiness to those who heard it, they thrilled the sages in the forest as well as people of all types. When they sang before Sri Rama himself, he, Sri Rama, was so charmed that he left his throne and unconsciously edged his way to the two singers.

Such meaning is given to music in India that it is known as the very soul of the people, the language of the highest self which speaks to all creation. Sri Krishna, the divine cowherd, was beautiful enough to charm all by his very personality. Yet, he used the flute to stir in the hearts of all, that which music alone can move. Thus did he attract all creation, not only human nature but all nature, to himself. The animals stood spell-bound hearing the music of the flute, as did the trees before the lute of Orpheus.

Again and again, sages and great beings have said that music is the language of the Devas, for it is obviously the one and only force that brings to humanity a reminder of its divine origin. The great sage, Bharata, speaks of music as the essence of the dance. Dance without it would become mere physical acrobatics. Music is a force that can be moulded into any form. In

India, where the civilization has specialised in the understanding of spiritual values, music has been the chief instrument of philosophers, poets, healers, spiritual teachers and priests. The great Tamil saints have spoken in poetry and sung in music. Kabir, the great Muslim devotee of Sri Rama, spoke in poetry and sang in music. Mirabai sang her devotion to Krishna. It is only through music that the human heart can satisfactorily pour out its deepest emotions even to the Highest. There is no mark of distinction between poetry and music, for poetry itself is an aspect of Music, the basic language of Gods and men.

In the Indian dance an aspect of Abhinaya (expression) is called Vachika, by which true meaning is conveyed *to* the dancer and true emotion is born. This becomes external in the expression of face and hands and body. Vachika Abhinaya is the music that is *sung* to express the meaning of the dance. Yet, when Nataraja is described as the Divine Dancer, it is said that His Vachika is the speech of all people. It is obvious both from this and from experience, that speech or sound comes into the world through the impulse of rhythm

(movement or evolution), into two ways of musical expression, poetry and music, as they are understood by humanity to-day. Music is the root of the dance, of poetry and of a number of other forms of expression. Music will reach realms that no language can reach. It is because of this that music is the language of the soul.

India has understood this and has allied the highest to the lowest forms of creation. It is known that music is the miracle nectar that will give energy to those who need action. So the villager sings as he ploughs, as he draws water from the well, as he carries heavy loads. There is no field of activity in India in which music has not given its stimulus. While it stimulates, it also puts to sleep the child or the sick. In the West also, music is used as the power to stimulate action ; it has inspired those on the battle-fields, as in India it has given courage to those who are depressed and unhappy. India being a land of devotion and spirituality, one finds that wherever there is music it has always reminded us of the beauty of Sri Rama, Krishna and of every aspect of expression of divinity—the one God with manifold forms.

As music is the soul of our being, it naturally stirs our emotions profoundly. It is by this stirring of the emotions that the mind is stimulated and inspired and the body energised. Therefore the fundamental expression of emotion is the highest form of expression. So it expresses itself in the highest devotion of Sri Thyagaraja who sings that music is the easiest, happiest and most effective way to liberation or Moksha. To great musicians and artists of the West, as to those of India, music is the universal language of mankind, the speech that melts every heart.

Therefore Indian Music has based its knowledge on the human emotions, for only by understanding human emotions is it possible to use music as a basis for helping humanity. India's greatest contribution to humanity is this spiritual outlook allied to creation in its manifold expressions. Therefore the root knowledge of music and dance is the science of the emotions. It is because of this that the raga system is the essence of Indian music. The West specialises in harmony, India in melody. Generally it is thought that melody in itself is monotonous and bound to lack variety. As art represents the soul of the people, Indian music is based on the

soul of India's teaching. India's teaching is based on the individual. So melody, the expression of the individual, is so highly evolved that it is the very expression of individual aspiration. An individual is in himself an embodiment of myriad emotions with their varied depths and subtleties. There is nothing more varied or fascinating than human emotions. It is from this point of view that the raga system of music has taken deep root in Indian consciousness. In this way the individual musician not only has at his command all the hundreds of ragas, each with its expression of emotion, influence, idea, but he is also the sole instrument of creative music. He alone can move in all the realms of music whether in heaven or on earth. It is his experience, and therefore as a creator he is dependent on none else than his own individual inspiration. By this he portrays to all the ultimate experience of each one of his listeners.

Western Music is the essence of the collective individuality, and the musician represents the part of the universal self, that harmony of many individualities that become the One. Therefore, to the unaccustomed ear, Indian

music with its ragas, is more difficult to understand, for, in order truly to understand ragas, you must understand Man. Again, it is the essence of Man in his dual quality that reflects the music into modes of expression as in the concept of the Raga and the Ragini, common to North Indian music. The idea behind the Raga-Ragini concept being so true, it has inspired painters and philosophers. It is a fundamental truth of creation, and we see it expressed in the story of Parvati and Shiva who are embodied in One as Ardhanarishvara. One sees it in the story of Radha and Krishna—not the cowherd girl who loves Krishna but the essential principle of Man which is the Man and Woman. It also reveals the Miracle of Creation in which the highest union of the soul with the Cosmic Being (Atma and Paramatma) is the ultimate end as also the beginning of Creation. So again in music this principle finds its expression in Raga and Ragini. In the North, not only musicians but painters have portrayed the Raga-Ragini concept and by their imagination have woven together hundreds of exquisite stories. Again one sees that music is not only poetry, dance and drama, but painting and

colour. The raga system of music is a representative of the fundamental principles of life that it became the inspirer of all searchers after Truth. The music of the West grew in meaning and greatness through the great philosopher Pythagoras who came to India to study both Philosophy and Music. It was he who brought to Greece certain numbers of Modes (inspired by the Indian Ragas and similar to it) which formed the chanting of the Gregorians from which harmony was evolved.

Music is the saving grace of humanity and God's best gift to Man, the Art of heaven brought to earth and the art of earth that we take to heaven. Shall we be worthy of this precious gift and spread it on earth to remove its cruelties and sufferings so that the Earth-Goddess herself will sing in praise of both God and Man ?

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